

There's More to Dying than Death: A Buddhist Perspective, by Lama Shenpen Hookham. Birmingham: Windhorse Publications, 2006. PB., 224 pp., \$14.95/£9.89, ISBN-10: 1899579680, ISBN-13: 978-1899579686

This book is a commentary on the processes of death and dying according to the Vajrayāna tradition. It is based both on the living oral teaching transmissions of Dzogchen and Mahāmudrā (of which Lama Shenpen Hookham is an authority), as well as literary sources wherever applicable. Most notable amongst these is Tsele Natsok Rangdrol's *Mirror of Mindfulness* (Rangjung Yeshe, 1987), but Hookham also draws upon 'the teachings of the *Prajñāpāramitā sūtras* on Emptiness, the *Tathāgatagarbha sūtras* on the Buddha Nature inherent in every living being and the teachings of the *Avatamsaka Sūtra* on the vastness and interpenetration of all worlds' (xii) although by her own admission these collections are not precisely referenced.

The book is not exclusively targeted at Buddhists, and is not a 'technical manual' for guidance at the time of death as such. The book introduces Vajrayāna concepts concerning the process of dying, underpinned by the above-mentioned sources, but also illustrated by Hookham's own experiences of dealing with dead and dying Buddhists (and others) in the West. Given that one natural market for this book is that of counsellors specializing in terminal illness and bereavement, Hookham makes an important distinction between Buddhist ideas and meditation techniques as 'therapy', and Buddhism as practised by Buddhists, this being a distinction which runs through the book. Buddhist principles which are generally applicable (and hopefully helpful) are introduced, and in turn are made specific to the case of Buddhist practitioners. For example chapter 5, 'Relating to your mind at death', begins with advice not to get tied up in obsessive thoughts about how one wishes one's situation to be, but to be mindful and accepting of how things are at a given moment and behave accordingly: 'Whatever the present experience, it's a matter of recognizing that that's how it is and that's fine... that's the experience I am opening to from my heart' (92). The chapter then moves on to introduce some basic *satipaṭṭhāna* practice, and eventually concludes with guidance for Vajrayāna Buddhists to choose the practice they will best be able to do, mindfully, at the moment of death; their 'Death Dharma'.

In doing this, the book skilfully balances (a) staying true to esoteric concepts and doctrines, (b) presenting these with clarity to a non-specialist readership, (c) not breaching any *samaya*, and (d) presenting these teachings in a way which will make the book useful to Buddhist and non-Buddhist readers. None of the above is necessarily easy to achieve individually – it is quite a feat to achieve all four in the one volume.

If I have a criticism of books of this 'level', it is that they sometimes lack clarity concerning the glosses used for technical terms. The book includes what is in a sense a small 'reverse glossary', listing as it does many of the English expressions used in the text itself and giving the original Sanskrit and Tibetan terms (plus an explanation). This makes it more valuable to Buddhist scholars and those

practitioners who are more engaged with technical terminology. But while ‘Clear Light’ is a fairly consistently appropriate gloss for *prabhāsvara*, other glosses in the book are less so, such as ‘Awakened Heart’ for *bodhicitta*. Having such matters made clear in the glossary makes certain passages in the book that much more meaningful and smoother to read. Unfortunately not every term is covered in this way. On pages 11–12 the author discusses ‘the fundamental nature of awareness’ without being explicit as to what it is in a technical sense: *citta*? something *vijñāna*-related? *prabhāsvara* again? Further reading indicates the latter, but this is not clear and on first reading a case for other definitions could be made.

It is a cliché, but this book is as much about how to have a good Buddhist life as it is about how to have a good Buddhist death. There are sections explaining day-to-day practices such as prayer and its efficacy in the Vajrayāna orientation (chapter 7), as well as an ongoing theme of meditation. As I read it, chapter 4 (‘Trusting the Heart’) is about the practice of *guru yoga* in all but name. The section on *karma* (59–65) is an excellent introduction to the concept — lucid and nuanced.

I found chapter 9 — ‘Practical planning for one’s own death’ — the most thought-provoking, due to the issues it raises regarding Buddhist practical ethics. Several of these issues concern the role of drugs and technologies which prolong life (and for that matter, death). Morphine may eliminate pain but it clouds the mind and would disturb one’s meditation at the time of death. At what point should life-support be switched off? Furthermore, organ donation is an act of compassion and generosity, but is it always appropriate? If so, when should extraction take place? Given that in Vajrayāna understanding one’s consciousness will still be present in the body for a period after clinical death, the body should be left undisturbed for a while as the dissolution process runs its course. For most this is over in minutes, but for advanced practitioners it can take considerably longer, and it is dangerous to disturb the body at this time — particularly with any invasive procedures. Consequently it is better if the more advanced practitioners do not give up their organs for donation. If their organs could help someone to live, does this make them less compassionate? Or is this a narrow ‘this life’ view that fails to appreciate the enlightened activity of an advanced practitioner which spans many lifetimes? The question is academic. Advanced practitioners such as this are extremely rare, and often so old when they die that (with all due respect) their organs are unlikely to be useful for saving another’s life. However, the interaction between normative Buddhist ethics, the popular view of the nobility of organ donation, modern clinical medicine and Vajrayāna death physiology is interesting to explore.

Though *There’s More to Dying than Death* is a non-academic work, it is an excellent book which achieves what it sets out to do. It would be of obvious interest to those studying Buddhist death practices, particularly those interested in *emic* (insider) accounts. More generally it might interest social scientists researching religion and globalisation and the ways in which religious practices cross cultural boundaries. With a few caveats, it would even make a stimulating addition to the reading list for an undergraduate course on Buddhist practice.

Nick Swann
 nick.swann@newport.ac.uk
 University of Wales, Newport